Where Do We WANT To Go From Here?

By ARTHUR KIESS, '37

In the selection of a career there is a logical sequence of questions which must be answered one by one: What shall I be? In what field shall I work? What function shall I perform? The five hundred and ninety-four men and women now enrolled in the freshman class of the College of Engineering of the Ohio State University answered the initial question some time ago, at least tentatively. No sooner did they get to the campus, however, than they were asked the second big question, "In what field do you want to work?" Two-thirds of them were unable to answer; and, judging from the records, ten per cent will still be undecided at the end of this school year. Such a condition is neither unusual nor serious. The freshman has a long, long furrow to plow.

But it's a more weighty problem when *one-third of the seniors* in the graduating class find themselves at a loss when asked "What kind of work do you want to do?" More than one granite-faced personnel representative from a prospective employer may ask that in those all-important interviews; and the senior who doesn't have a fairly convincing reply may create a poor impression. Let's examine then the problem of the man who doesn't know what he wants to do.

Students in the smaller departments of the engineering college seem to have the least trouble deciding upon a job, perhaps because their choice is limited. In the departments of mechanical and electrical engineering, where the variety of available jobs seems to be greater, few men really know what they want to do. Many who think they know have been misled by the glamour surrounding the industry and a superficial knowledge of the real facts about the work involved. The chemical engineering department doesn't expect its undergraduates to be able to select the job they'll fit into best.

A few years ago the Society for the Promotion of Engineering Education made a comprehensive survey of technical education in the United States. Some of the statistics from the resulting report have a bearing on our problem. For instance, about three-fourths of the engineering college graduates go to work in fields corresponding closely to the studies pursued in college, but over half of all graduates change jobs during the first two or three years out of school. The estimate that one-third of the seniors to graduate next spring don't really know what they want to do looks conservative in the light of this fact.

One of the few who do know what they want is that man who has had practical experience in certain work and comes to college to prepare for a career in that field. Such a man plans all his activities with the express purpose of making himself more proficient in the work he KNOWS he will do. In many ways this is an ideal set-up. It might seem that the average student could take a page from the success-story of that fortunate man and decide early to concentrate on a certain narrow phase of some subject. Here rises the old problem: To be, or not to be—a SPECIALIST.

If we were living in a regimented socialistic society, we might greatly improve the efficiency of our system of technical education by arbitrarily assigning students to specific studies and forcing them to become technical geniuses within those narrow spheres of activity. That system would effectively relieve students of the troublesome necessity of deciding what job they want. As things are, however, educators generally agree that undergraduates should stick to the "broad fundamentals" and that engineering students should specialize in nothing except the science of solving problems. Three-fourths of the practical engineers answering the questionnaire sent out by the Society for the Promotion of Engineering Education during the investigation mentioned above advocated specialization for undergraduates. However, they were unanimous in the belief that specialized instruction should be given for the sole purpose of teaching fundamental principles. Therefore the practical men agree with the educators after all.

Here on the Ohio State campus the usual attitude toward specialization prevails, with perhaps a few apparent exceptions. The chairman of one of the smaller departments says, "Sure it's all right. Go ahead and specialize all you want to—*just as soon as you're sure you know what you want to do.*" It's clear that he doesn't consider specialization a solution to our problem. Most of the larger departments are thoroughly "sold" on the policy of making their curricula as liberal as possible, even in the face of the demand from some industries for specialists. So it seems that specialization can not be used to help solve the "What job do I want?" problem for the average student. How then is a man to decide what work he should get into?

Practical contact with industry is perhaps the most helpful influence in choosing a job, and the return of the "summer job" is again making this possible. Personal contact with men in various activities is invaluable. This may be had a function sponsored by the technical societies, sectional meetings where students are usually welcome, joint meetings with student branches, and perhaps special vocational guidance conferences. Most practicing engineers are glad to talk privately to students about opportunities in the field they know most about. Reading technical literature is another good way to give special interests a chance to develop. "Vocational interest tests" may be useful in some cases, but faith in them is not widespread.

Self-analysis may be valuable when deciding what school and department to enter or even in selecting a first job, provided the student has had practical experience to give him the proper perspective. Consideration of hobbies and extra-curricular activities is a vital part of self-analysis. It will often indicate what work will prove most interesting.

However, *it is not absolutely necessary to decide before graduating exactly what job you want.* The only positive test of a student's fitness for certain work is *actual experience in that line.* If a man hasn't had practical experience before his senior year, he probably will be incapable of selecting his first job wisely. In that case he should choose from the opportunities available the job that looks best at the time. Experience in that job will show him whether or not he will be happy in such work. It's much easier to decide that you are NOT fitted for certain work than to choose the work for which you ARE qualified.

In conclusion, let's repeat a word of encouragement for the senior who still hasn't decided what kind of work he wants. Don't worry about your inability to select a job. Your preparation has been broad; you are ready for anything. So take the most promising job available and give it an honest trial. The chances are that you will develop tremendous interest in it. If you don't—well many others change jobs several times during the first few years out of school; and a few highly successful men have looked *twenty or thirty years* before they discovered The Job for them. In the long run few people live to regret having attended an engineering college, and still fewer live to regret graduating from the engineering college of the Ohio State University. You probably won't.